

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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BUILDING FOR AUTHORSHIP

Lessons from the Experience of Octavus Roy Cohen

IF at first you don't succeed——"

Reluctant as we may feel about putting this hoary copy-book maxim into cold type once more, here we are almost driven to it. Most of us would be glad to give it decent burial if it would ever stay buried, but always someone comes along and revives it.

The latest resuscitator is Octavus Roy Cohen, successful delineator of negro life, whose tales have been appearing so regularly in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Cohen believes in the copy-book maxim, and practices it.

The famous Southern writer was lunching with a small group of Denver writing men the other day when the conversation turned to the intriguing question of how soon a struggling writer should be able to determine whether it would not be more profitable for him to leave off attempting to write and go into some lucrative pursuit, such as ditch-digging.

When the question was put to Cohen he fixed a whimsical smile upon Courtney Riley Cooper, who was his host, and remarked: "Well, Coop, I don't know about your case, but I wrote 143 stories before I ever sold one."

Exclamations of astonishment and incredulity were in order.

"Yes," Cohen added, "I had a hunch that if I kept at it long enough I'd learn the trick, and I'm not sorry now that I didn't sell sooner."

"If you had stopped with your tenth or twelfth rejection, as most novices do, you wouldn't be nicking *The Saturday Evening Post* for \$1000 every time you sell them a story," Cooper observed.

"That's right," assented Cohen. "You've touched on the trouble with most beginners; they get discouraged too easily. They aren't willing to pay the price demanded for success, and they lack faith in themselves. If more people had the persistence

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to write 150 stories before selling one, the writers who are making the big magazines today would have greater competition than they have.

"I have known many beginners with ability who failed to make the grade as story-writers because they quit after the fourth or fifth rejection. Every story ought to teach the writer some point about his business, and there are more than four or five points to fiction-writing. For that reason alone, no writer ought to be discouraged if the fourth or fifth yarn doesn't sell.

"Of course, some persons might grind out a thousand stories and never acquire the faculty of writing fiction. We'll grant, of course, that one must have those qualities of imagination, perception, and appreciation of literary values without which fiction cannot be produced. But no one can find out whether he possesses these qualities in four or five, or even a dozen sporadic attempts at writing. You've got to keep at it steadily—keep grinding them out, never minding if they come back."

Cohen's experience emphasizes the truth that writing is a craft, and one which, like every other craft, requires time to master. Just stop to consider what it means to write 143 stories! If Cohen turned out a story a week, it would mean that he spent nearly three years regularly typing out unsalable yarns. Enough apparently fruitless labor to discourage any save a man who had faith in his ability and who valued the prize highly enough to pay for it with incessant drudgery.

If Cohen were the only successful writer who did not give up at the first rebuff—but he is not. His history, with variations, has been duplicated in the early career of the majority of big writers of today.

A few authors seem to have received the story-teller's inheritance full-fashioned at birth, but the great mass of successful fiction has not been produced by them. Most writers, like Cohen, achieve success only after scores of their stories have gone the rounds of editors and eventually landed in the waste-basket. Persistence is the principal equation in the formula for success in story-writing.

Not only was Cohen persistent in his efforts to learn to write, he was equally persistent when he had written in learning where to sell his stories. For years he studied the magazines and kept statistical data on the types of stories they used, when they used them, which variety they avoided, and which they favored. As he told the luncheon group:

"In those early days"—Cohen is just past thirty now—"when I was turning out copy for the waste-basket, I learned a lot of tricks that have served me handsomely. My unsuccessful

dealings with magazines and editors then taught me what I now know about dealing successfully with them.

"Before I began writing under contract, I used to send my yarns out to this editor and that, and I finally worked up to a batting average of 85 per cent. In other words, I was able to sell this percentage of my tales practically the first time out. I was able to do this simply because I knew the market.

"I studied the magazines," he explained, "and figured out their requirements. That's half the game. It's the business end of the enterprise. If a writer wants to be successful, he can't afford to neglect the business phase of his profession. Magazine editors have their idiosyncrasies and prejudices, and the writer must know what they are.

"If I write a story in which a woman deceives her husband, I know there are certain editors who don't like women who deceive their husbands, and I know they won't buy that story. Knowing who these editors are saves me a lot of postage.

"You might think it takes personal acquaintance with editors to learn their likes and dislikes, but it doesn't. I gained most of my information by studying their magazines.

"Next to knowing an editor's prejudices, it is important to know what types of stories magazines run. Out of ten stories appearing in any magazine, a certain proportion will be, say,

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Western stories. Another proportion will be stories of business life. Some magazines lean almost exclusively to one kind of story, others try to strike a balance. The more the writer knows about the requirements of magazines, the more successfully he can plan his work and pick his markets."

Today Octavus Roy Cohen probably carries around in his head as much knowledge of the fiction market as any story-writer. Many writers neglect the mundane side of their calling; but Cohen's experience ought to teach them that attention to the marketing feature pays—that and persistence.

CREATE A CHARACTER, SAYS WILEY

"LILY attenshun!

"Lady Luck, is you with me now!"

Hugh Wiley, originator of "Wildeat," the popular series of negro stories running through The Saturday Evening Post, declared in a recent discussion with others of the writing fraternity that "Creation of a character is the most successful plan in short-story writing.

"Once this character is established," he said, "the author may continue with any number of tales narrating his adventures. When the public becomes interested in a character in fiction, it is always anxious to read more about him.

"Where did I get the idea of Wildeat? I didn't get the idea—I knew him.

"You know my home is in Savannah, Ga. Well, Wildeat is a character down there. I had thought of working him into a story for some time, but it was not until I came home from France after the war that I tackled it. In France I had been around some negro labor battalions, and picked up some good material from them. In my stories I just combined Wildeat and the labor battalion stuff."

Wiley broke into the magazine field in 1912 while a reporter on the staff of the New York World. He first attracted note through his tales of the South and particularly of the Mississippi river. Then came a series of Chinatown stories, in which he displayed an unsurpassed knowledge of the ways of the Celestial.

"The run of popularity with stories is strange," Wiley said.

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"Take those Chinese yarns. They went big for a while, and then I took up the negro stories. Lately I turned out two more of the Chinese stories, only to find that the magazine publishers could use no more of them.

"Dramatization is the big thing now," he continued. "That's where the money is. The picture rights on a successful story quite frequently bring in ten times as much as the story itself. You know we all are mercenary to a certain extent."

Wiley spent several weeks during the early part of this summer in Southern California supervising the dramatization and filming of "Wildead" and his mascot goat, "Lily."

CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 26.

FREQUENTLY the critic is asked whether it is not wise to submit literary material to editors through an agent. The question is answered by W. Adolphe Roberts, formerly editor of Ainslee's Magazine, in an article in The Writers' Monthly of Springfield, Mass., for February. Mr. Roberts observes:

"A constant stream of manuscripts from agents pours through a magazine office. Theoretically, each one of these is not only of the possible kind, but it has been selected to meet the special demands of the editor. In practice, the average of availability is low. Agents appear to concentrate on the work of authors already well known and that of a few newcomers whom they plan to boost into fame. Their course is logical enough, because in that direction lie high prices and high commissions. They are traveling salesmen

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for their stars, and get results. The general run of their manuscripts, however, are merely kept circulating. Some of them are bound to sell, if not at the first place to which they go, then at the tenth, or the twenty-fifth.

"All agents are not equally mechanical in their handling of stories by obscure writers, though probably all could improve their methods. They serve no good purpose by deluging an editor with manuscripts he is unlikely to buy. On the other hand, an agent is invaluable when one is in a hurry to find a story of a given type. Nor could he be dispensed with when one wishes to buy the work of foreign authors or of recognized American authors living outside of New York."

Every editor and experienced author knows these statements to be true. So if you are not a "recognized" author, and if you have no reason to suppose the agent is "planning to boost you into fame," your best bet is to submit your stories directly and in person to the editor. Sometimes a bit of interest manifested in a personal letter from some editor may be nursed along by you into recognition and success, when the opportunity would have been overlooked by the agent.

Fragment 27.

ARE you, perchance, one who fails to make the progress of which you are capable in literary work because you follow no definite working plan? Many students accomplish little because they are impelled only by a vague desire to do some work in the indefinite future. Other interests have a way of interfering and blocking the performance of their good intentions.

The only sure way to accomplish results in any line is to fix upon a definite time for working and then work accordingly. Give heed to the words of a great writer on this subject. Victor Hugo must have known from experience the pitfalls of literary workers for he said:

"He who every morning plans the transactions of the day and follows out that plan carries a thread that will guide him through the labyrinth of the most busy life. The orderly arrangement of his time is like a ray of light which darts itself through his occupations. But where no plan is laid, where the disposal of time is surrendered merely to the chance of incidents, chaos will soon reign."

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Fragment 28.

I HOLD myself up as a horrible example of a writing drudge," said Fannie Hurst, in a recent interview. "I think nothing of sitting five or six hours over a phrase. It generally takes me about six hours a day for three or four weeks to write a short-story. I write about ten short-stories a year, and I think I am somewhat of a prolific writer. After working so hard, I am always amused when someone says to me, 'I saw your little piece in the magazine and I enjoyed it enormously.'

"I am rather wary of the word inspiration. Fortunately, I have never quite got its meaning. There are times when I might not know which way I'm going in my stories, but still I somehow work them out."

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